

Off the Beat

Some Memories Of Heber Creeper

By THERON H. LUKE

The rolling stock (by now considerable) of the Heber Creeper stands parked for the winter on the tracks around the old Heber station. It might be called "The Little Train That Could" ... and did.

By now it is successfully established as a summer tourist train — good news for its backers and a means of prolonging its life as a colorful mountain railroad.

The Creeper goes back to around the turn of the century, built by the Denver and Rio Grande to tap the thriving livestock business of Heber City, which at one time shipped more sheep annually than you could count if you had insomnia from here to there.

I cannot remember when the "Creeper" appellation (fancy word for name, title or designation) was first applied to it. I can remember when it was a daily passenger train — Heber to Provo in the morning, Provo to Heber late in the day — which kept a reasonable schedule. It always carried a mail car and at least a couple of passenger cars, so it made a respectable train. And it was then virtually the only way in and out of the valley, so nearly everyone used it.

When I was a child in Heber "the hack" would go around gathering up passengers early in the morning, sometimes (I guess in the winter months) just about daylight. It was a horse-drawn whitetop. If you date me back to the Civil War you're wrong. It was about the time of World War I.

I can remember as vividly as if it were yesterday the night the entire family went to the station to meet my oldest brother coming back from that war. He had been wounded, had spent months in hospitals, and had a silver plate in his leg in lieu of a shin bone — something from which he suffered the rest of his life.

I can remember him stepping off the train, in World War I leggings, and with a cane — and my mother flinging herself sobbing into his arms. I was seven.

By World War II the Creeper was still running, but very spasmodically and as only a freight train. My wife and our two oldest children took it from Heber to Provo one cold day in the spring of 1942. They rode the caboose with the crew. By then there was no passenger car. The trip took all day. There was a rock on the track. At another point the front trucks of the engine ran off and had to be jacked back on. The crew members shared their lunches with two hungry children, whose mother hadn't figured on taking all day to go from Heber to Provo.

The Creeper does better as a tourist train now, although it doesn't set any records — which is the whole idea. When we rode it last summer it made a leisurely jaunt from Bridal Veil Falls to Heber, giving many views of the river you don't get from the road. The conductor —

one of the several Heber residents who find summer employment on it — was well indoctrinated. "Doesn't that coal smoke smell good?" he queried. To me it smelled like it always did — like coal smoke. I'm not one to turn my nose up at it, but I refused to regard it as perfume, as he felt I should.

There are two stories about the Creeper that I like, well-rooted in legend. My brother Harold played on the Wasatch High School basketball team when they rode the Creeper to Provo for all their games and played teams in Utah Valley. He swears that Tommy McMullan, a lightning-fast forward, could dribble a basketball behind the Creeper on a smooth stretch of track and keep up. My brother was never one to underplay a good story, but I can't, today, prove him wrong.

Another one he told me — and this I cannot disprove either, was when the train came to Heber for the first time. The whole town had come down to see it, clustering up around the engine and cars. There was, according to the story, a frantic stampede in retreat when the engineer looked out on the crowd, squirted a stream of tobacco juice, and warned: "Look Out! I'm gonna turn her around!"